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ABSTRACT

This document introduces a study conducted by the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) to review, interpret, and disseminate findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments in citizenship and social studies. The study represents an investigation funded by the Education Commission of the States and coordinated by a special Steering Committee working under the auspices of NCSS. Six tasks were identified by the committee to examine NAEP: methods and procedures; the validity of the exercise; interpretation of the findings; consistency of the exercises with NCSS Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines, desirability, and realistically satisfactory performance levels; the assessment model; and dissemination. Also included in this document is background information on the NAEP, the purpose of which was to make available to those interested in education the attainments of students in citizenship and social studies. A major portion of this document focuses on NAEP decisions on a host of issues; for example, in considering objectives, who was to decide what was to be assessed in social studies and, moreover, what the basic criteria should be for the objectives. The latter portion of the document points out that the NAEP assessment in itself is neither an evaluation nor explanation, but is a collection of data provided in national percentages for performance of each exercise, by age, regions, sex, race, parental education, and size and type of community. (DE)

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# NATIONAL ASSESSMENT

# AND

# SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION

A Review of Assessments in Citizenship and Social Studies by the National Council for the Social Studies

SO 008 019

National Assessment of Educational Progress
A Project of the
Education Commission of the States

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INTRODUCTION

# National Assessment and Social Studies Education: The Setting

Jean Fair

In the midst of unsettling social change education becomes inevitably a matter of public debate and policy making. The heat, even outright turmoil, of recent years has subsided; and faith in education as the road to salvation has given way. Still firm is the belief that education is basic to individual and social welfare. And still widespread is the uneasy feeling that schools are not doing what they ought to be doing, and not even doing well what they have long been doing. When too little money is at hand for public services, the debate is further sharpened.

The pressures in policy making make plain the need for information. Simply stated, young people go to school to learn something. Although the country has accumulated information on scores of no doubt useful matters, little systematic evidence has been available on the crucial point of it all, actual educational attainment.

Efforts to gather evidence soon confront the basic questions of the debate: what should young people be learning, what should they achieve; and to what extent are they doing so? To these two are added others: how to find out, and how to explain what is found in some way useful to decision-making.

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Information gathering is no simple task: indeed, it is a subject of debate in itself.

A major effort has been under way by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Of special significance to social studies education are its recent reports of findings in Citizenship and Social Studies, 1969-70 and 1971-72 assessments.

Some few words of background are needed here. Formal discussion of the possibilities of a national assessment of educational attainments began some ten years ago. Supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a private foundation, the Exploratory Committee on Assessing the Progress of Education came into being in 1964 to develop a concrete plan. This Committee's work became the basis of the present national project. In mid-1969 the Educational Commission of the States, a compact presently of some 47 states and territories to consider and coordinate educational efforts and problems, assumed the governance of the project.

The prime purpose of the National Assessment of Educational Progress is to make information available to those interested in education. Assessments are carried on at regular intervals, at the present in ten areas: reading, writing, science, mathematics, social studies, citizenship, career and occupational development, literature, art, and music: in short, in much more than the 3 R's. NAEP assesses educational achievement, not merely school achievement. Obviously schools have responsibilities for education. Still television, magazines, libraries, newspapers, civic organizations, especially those for young people, religious institutions, personal opportunities and experiences--these and

others all contribute to education. National Assessment does not aim to distinguish one source of achievement from another.

Moreover, National Assessment is not a national examination, a set of hurdles which students must pass over for continuing opportunity. Neither does National Assessment attempt to measure the performance of any one person, school district, or even state, nor to award praise or blame to any institution. Although no search can be made except from some frame of reference, NAEP consistently refrains from interpretive explanations of the data collected. Even though perfection is never to be expected nor debate cut off, National Assessment is a serious, highly professional undertaking. What can be learned from its efforts deserves attention.

Consequently, the National Council for the Social Studies welcomed the opportunity for independent study, interpretation, and dissemination of the assessments in Citizenship and Social Studies, two sides of the coin of social studies education. That NAEP supported this study with a grant of funds is a mark of NAEP professionalism.

An NCSS Steering Committee took over all responsibility: Jean Fair, chairperson, June Gilliard, Dana Kurfman, James Shaver, and Ronald Smith. The task of dissemination has been the responsibility of the Steering Committee. Five other tasks were identified, and major investigators appointed to give time and thought to examining them: 1) the assessment model, Bob Taylor; 2) methods and procedures, Guy Larkins; 3) the validity of the exercises, Francis Hunkins; 4) interpretation of the findings, Benjamin Cox; 5) consistency of the exercises with

NCSS Social Studies Curriculum Guidelines, desirability, and realistically satisfactory performance levels, June Chapin. Each of the investigators' final reports was reviewed by the Steering Committee and, except for the first, by members of task review panels. The first, a delineation of the assessment model, is accompanied by two commissioned papers speaking to the model and prepared by Joseph Grannis and Michael Scriven. Those who worked on this project were not only competent but of varying professional roles in social studies education; attention was given to men-women ratios, minority groups, and geographic areas. The project has aimed for thoughtful, honest, and open points of view.

The Bulletin reports on each of the five tasks of investigation, but with emphasis upon what has been less fully presented elsewhere. Readers will find another emphasis in a special issue of Social Education for May, 1974, on National Assessment in Citizenship and Social Studies.[1] The complete Final Reports to NAEP will be available through ERIC. Since many people will find the publications of NAEP itself useful, a bibliography is included at the end of this Bulletin. These Bulletin chapters examine the assessments from several stances. Both Taylor and Larkins treat the process of arriving at objectives, methods, and procedures, but in differing contexts. Larkins looks at the objectives and Chapin's panel at the exercises with NCSS Guidelines as criteria. Hunkins's panel considered the validity of the exercises for the objectives, while Chapin's panel considered the worth of the exercises by the criteria of the NCSS Guidelines.

Cox interprets findings from exercises categorized as social studies knowledge by the method of analysis, while Chapin's panel judges realistically satisfactory performance levels for individual exercises.

The Project believed National Assessment, as well as other assessment programs, better served by stating points of view which have both differences and commonalities. Final Reports and this Bulletin do attempt, however, to consider basic questions: what is assessed, the extent to which the assessments can be counted on, what can be learned from the procedures themselves, what the findings mean, and the extent to which they are useful.

So ambitious and potentially influential an undertaking as a national assessment of educational progress must from the outset make decisions on a host of issues. Some are highlighted here and elsewhere in this Bulletin.

A number of issues cluster around the matter of objectives. Who was to decide, first of all, what was to be assessed in citizenship and social studies - or any other areas? Teachers? Administrators? Those in state departments of education or those at the grass roots? Experts in social studies education? Scholars in relevant disciplines? Textbook authors and publishers? Minority groups? Students? Those who support custom in education, "what everybody knows it's always been," or those who support innovation, "the cutting edge?" Researchers on educational problems? Educational policy makers in legislatures and school boards?

Early in the enterprise and after consultation with several kinds of people, basic criteria for objectives were set. Objectives had to be "1) considered important by scholars, b) accepted as an educational task by the school, and 3) considered desirable by thoughtful lay citizens."[2] These criteria pointed to the kinds of people who were to decide, if not to the particulars of the process.

Then contracting agencies, in a sense, experts in assessment, searched the literature of the field out of which came a tentative list of objectives. Panels of those competent in social studies education or the fields of social science/history, teachers and other school persons, and thoughtful lay people concerned about education reviewed and revised until a set of objectives was formulated. How many kinds of people should be heard from? Were a sufficient number of persons from minority groups included? Were there too many professional, comparatively well-off people, and too few who could see education from the vantage of the poor? Were groups who needed information for policy-making under-represented? These are matters not readily resolved, especially within the necessary constraints of time and cost, nor closed off to future reconsideration. At any rate, it is noteworthy that thought from both the professional field and several sorts of people including laymen contributed to the formulation .

Such a process does not make for a theoretically clean and consistent set of objectives. On the one hand, it is foolish

to disregard the contributions of scholarship. On the other hand, ours is a changing society and a pluralistic one. Not even scholars agree. No one official set of objectives exists, nor even one which draws wide allegiance, and probably least of all in the area of social studies education. Most of us like it that way. It can be argued that no single satisfactory set of social studies objectives is either possible or desirable. Against the merits of a theoretically consistent conception of social studies education must be balanced the need for a set of objectives which seem legitimate to many in society.

Almost from the start assessments in citizenship and social studies were separated. Much can be said in favor of two assessments rather than one focused on an area of critical yet controversial importance. Many will support the idea that citizenship is the responsibility of the school as a whole, not merely programs in social studies, or even that citizenship is as much the responsibility of out-of-school institutions. But if social studies education can be thought of as emphasizing what is less likely to be learned informally in the culture at large, it can hardly be conceived as something without integral relation to individual lives and the requirements of society. Nor can citizenship be defensibly conceived as social participation without thought or knowledge. Neither is it sensible to think of citizenship as primarily political and social studies non-political. Issues of distinction, overlap, and emphasis are difficult to resolve.

Crucial also was the decision about what was to be assessed.

National Assessment might have focused only upon some few basic skills, the 3 R's perhaps though they are far easier to name than identify. NAEP might have focused its efforts on assessing knowledge and knowledge only in some set of disciplines, or in subject areas commonly in school curriculums. NAEP might have attempted to assess the outcomes of typical, or presumably "best," or "poorest" school programs, or, for that matter, out-of school educational institutions. The list of possibilities is long. The actual decision was for assessing a broad range of fields. As a consequence the assessment yields information about aspects of educational attainment in the population as a whole for which data have been sparse. Moreover, the decision throws the weight of NAEP to a broad rather than narrow conception of educational attainment, especially important in social studies education. What is assessed exerts powerful influence on what schools see as important to teach and what students see as important to learn.

Another set of issues is embedded in the closely related area of exercises, expected to furnish evidence of attainment of the objectives, to be sure, but also to be significant in themselves. When objectives are translated into exercises, the chips are down.

Citizenship and Social Studies are inevitably touchy areas. To avoid what is controversial is in itself to take a position. To the credit of NAEP, it chose not to rule out the controversial. But how much and how sensitive? Review of exercises by panels of several sorts of people resulted in rewriting or even dropping a substantial proportion of exercises.[3] Social Studies and Citizenship were, indeed, more sensitive areas than some others. The

issue here is much like that in the matter of objectives. What kind of balance can be had between the need for attending to the views of many diverse social groups, and the necessity for developing exercises legitimate in the eyes of many in the country at large?

One more dilemma appears in the matter of "right answers," especially for those exercises about complex problems yielding to no simple solution and/or depending upon points of view and attitudes. Are all positions taken to be considered proper responses if their holders support them with whatever reasons? Or must some positions agree with predetermined proper responses, for example, support for the rights of the First Amendment? Or is some mixture appropriate? Blacks, Native American Indians, to name two of a number of groups, experience significant differences in their social worlds from those of dominant groups. What should be considered proper responses - or proper exercises - for such groups?

Although National Assessment, unlike many school assessment programs, has not operated on a shoestring, it too must function within limits of financial support, time, and the capabilities of the general field of assessment. NAEP too must make choices to what extent are self-reports in exercises justifiable substitutes for actual observation of "live" behavior? How much effort should be devoted to developing exercises assessing more complex, higher cognitive and affective behaviors? And, indeed, if such assessment requires much time from respondents, how much more time is feasible without throwing the baby out with the bath? Could special sub-studies do the job?

As does every assessment program, NAEP has had hard decisions in the construction of exercises. What they developed is a far cry, but a heartening one, from what many people have learned to think of as "tests." NAEP exercises in Social Studies and Citizenship frequently resort to paper and pencil, but also rely on interviews, and even observations of discussion tasks. If young people were asked to respond to the familiar multiple choice forms, they were also asked to view pictures; listen to songs; use maps, graphs, cards from a library card catalogue, and indexes; interact with each other in discussion groups; watch a film; and reply to interview questions. If not all, then many exercises are lively, innovative, readily related to the present social world, and exemplary.

A last set of issues are those of interpreting the finding. Assessment in itself is neither evaluation nor explanation.

As succeeding rounds of assessments in Citizenship and Social Studies are carried on, benchmark data will be available. Such comparisons can be made now in Science. "On most exercises measuring science knowledge and skills, achievement declined at all three school ages assessed--9, 13, and 17 years" from the first to the second assessments.[4] However, benchmark data can be had now for Citizenship and Social Studies.

As a guide to interpretation NAEP has developed national percentages of successful performance for each exercise (and for some sub-groups in the population and categories of exercises). Although illiminating, a few illustrations make it plain that these performance levels are not necessarily standards of what

is "good," "adequate," or even "bad." When asked in the Citizenship Assessment whether a person on TV or radio should be allowed to state any of three generally unpopular views, "statements which make some people angry," 3% at age 13, 17% at age 17, and 24% of young adults would allow all three statements and gave freedom of speech as the reason. Somewhat higher proportions would allow any one.[5] When asked to identify the meaning of monopoly in the Social Studies Assessment, 51% of the 17-year-olds and 56% of the young adults, could do so.[6] When asked in the Social Studies Assessment to read a line graph identifying retail prices for eggs and apples over a period of time, 89% of 13-year-olds, 96% of 17-year-olds, and 91% of young adults were able to do so.[7] But when the element of interpretation was included in an unreleased Social Studies exercise, fewer - 53% of those at age 13, 74% at age 17, and 69% of the young adults - could read and interpret a line graph.

NAEP also compiles results by groups: age, regions, sex, blacks and whites, parental education, and size and type of community. For each of these groups differences from the national percentages of success are available, and comparisons among broad groups possible. Whether these differences are to be viewed with alarm or praise depends in part upon the size of the difference and the extent to which educational opportunity for all is accepted. What is more, if the national percentage of success is judged too low, a more successful group performance may still be inadequate.

The proportion who are able "to do" an exercise depends in part upon the difficulty of the exercise. Many standardized tests have been set up to distinguish the most able, typically able, and least able, and exercises constructed accordingly. Although it might have been, such was not the purpose of National Assessment. Instead, NAEP aimed to describe the educational achievements of the population in four age groups. Consequently, NAEP developed about a third each of all exercises for the least able, typically able, and most able. Successful performance percentages must be read and results interpreted accordingly.

Of course, NAEP might have followed still another path: hoping for mastery, claiming that everyone should be able to perform every exercise successfully. Such a course would have required either a set of exercises, within the reach of all, or a set of more demanding exercises with a built-in and higher "failure" rate. The former would have failed to tap what the more able could do. The latter would have loaded the dice, emphasized not what has, but what has not been attained. Much is to be said for "mastery." Perhaps we have all been too tolerant of "not getting it," moving on to something else before learning is achieved. The problem, however, comes down to agreeing on exactly what, specifically which tasks every young person in this broad and diverse land should be able to perform.

The problems in settling on proper difficulty levels are again much like those in agreeing upon objectives. At any

rate, performance levels over, let us say 90%, can not simply and in themselves be judged as satisfactory, nor those below as unsatisfactory, pinpointing areas for improving educational endeavor.

National Assessment is almost inevitably caught between the frying pan and the fire. On the one hand, information from assessments can be better interpreted and used when tied to a school district or a social studies program. There, it seems at least, influencing conditions might be sorted out. Better yet, research questions and accompanying and flexible inquiry designs might point to influencing factors and implications for change. The meaning of data comes clearer when explanatory matters are related to outcomes, when questions posed give people a handle on the data. On the other hand, fears have been expressed from the outset that National Assessment might become a national testing program with all its consequent restraints. School districts, or states, or those engaged in some program or other - any identifiable persons or groups - could hardly be expected to enjoy or seek the glare of examination by some outside agency; sometimes it is enough to put up with those they can call their own. NAEP has intended to be neither a national testing program nor an examining agent. The thought of collecting data for identifiable institutions, programs, or individuals on a national scale staggers the mind. All that means, however, that National Assessment does not furnish information directly to those making policy decisions for particular states, or school districts, or classrooms, or social studies programs.

Moreover, a national assessment was conceived at a time when federal efforts in education were rowing and the spotlight on educational attainment in the country as a whole. By now efforts have in many respects shifted towards states and localities. They have, in turn, their own needs for evidence which a national assessment can satisfy only indirectly. Defensible assessment programs are costly, and shoddy or duplicate ones unjustifiable, all the more so in times of straightened economic cirucmstances. A mere collection of unrelated assessment data from some states here, some districts there could hardly allow for coherence in the whole or for information gathered in one place but useful in others.

In a sense, the strengths of National Assessment - and many others at state and local levels - have also been its weakness. What factors are to explain the findings? What produces what? For which policy questions are assessment data to be provided? NAEP is now addressing such problems by undertaking "special analysis activities requested by USOE to answer questions pertinent to federal policy decisions...": for example, analysis of results for group combinations, such as race within region and community, to provide information on the matter of whether "the federal government should devise efforts to redress resource imbalance and for whom?"[8] NAEP has also commissioned a study of background factors affecting school achievement with an eye toward the feasibility of including some of these in NAEP studies.[9] Perhaps there are other means by which NAEP can include consumers of assessment findings in some ways like those of deciding upon objectives.

Still some points seem clear and a few cited here. Typical performance on exercises in Citizenship and Social Studies of school-age young people in the Inner City is below the nation as a whole; typical performance of young people in well-off residential areas is above.[10] Obviously enough large proportions of Inner City young people are members of minority groups. Whatever can be said in support of arguments that the two assessments do not account sufficiently for the experiences of sub-cultural groups, it seems plain that attention must be paid. Social Studies education and the multitude of conditions which influence it have to be better. The complexity of the problems does not justify sweeping them under the rug.

Social studies educators will do well to look at the results of specific exercises. Only 41% of 17-year-olds can respond properly to all five parts of an exercise on using a simple ballot. Nor do young adults pick this up once they become of voting age.[11] Surely those in social studies education ought to take steps to see that 17-year-olds in their own schools do better on a matter so vital. A number of race-related exercises show up a basic fund of decency among young people.[12] In the midst of conflict and change social studies education ought to find ways to capitalize upon it. Some 82% of 13-year-olds and 93% of 17-year-olds (and interestingly only 67% of young adults) believe that "teen-age students should help decide what courses will be offered in their school system."[13] Such expectations need to be accounted for in social studies curricular planning.

What has been done and what has been found in National Assessment in Citizenship and Social Studies is worth thoughtful consideration.

## Footnotes

[1]NCSS Report on National Assessment of Educational Progress, Special issue of Social Education 38 (May 1974).

[2]Committee on Assessing the Progress of Education, Citizenship Objectives: 1969, now available through the Education Commission of the States. Denver.

[3]National Assessment of Educational Progress, The National Assessment Approach to Exercise Development. (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1970), pp. 35-41.

[4]National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Assessment Achievements: Findings, Interpretations and Uses, Report No. 48, (Denver, Education Commission of the States, 1974), p. 7.

[5]National Assessment of Educational Progress, Report 2: Citizenship (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1970), pp. 34-35.

[6]National Assessment of Educational Progress, Social Studies: an Overview, (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1974), p. 29.

[7]Ibid., p. 15.

[8]NAEP Newsletter 7:1 (January - February 1974), p. 3.

[9]NAEP Newsletter 7:3 (May - June 1974), p. 3.

[10]National Assessment of Educational Progress, Report 9: Citizenship, Results by Color, Parental Education, Size and Type of Community (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1972), pp. 79, 81. Social Studies: an Overview, op. cit., pp. 19-22, 40-44, 55-59.

[11] National Assessment of Educational Progress, Political Knowledge and Attitudes, (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1973), p. 46

[12] For example, Report 2: Citizenship, op. cit., pp. 18-21, and Political Knowledge and Attitudes, op. cit., pp. 18-21.

[13] Political Knowledge and Attitudes, p. 2.